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# JOHN D. MacDONALD

## THE LONELY SILVER RAIN



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John D. MacDonald

FAWCETT GOLD MEDAL • NEW YORK

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**A Fawcett Gold Medal Book**

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Every extreme attitude is a flight from the self --- the passionate state of mind is an expression of inner dissatisfaction.

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Without a family, man, alone in the world, trembles with the cold.

ANDRÉ MAUROIS

# 1



**O**NCE upon a time I was very lucky and located a sixty-five-foot hijacked motor sailer in a matter of days, after the authorities had been looking for months. When I heard through the grapevine that Billy Ingraham wanted to see me, it was easy to guess he hoped I could work the same miracle with his stolen *Sundowner*, a custom cruiser he'd had built in a Jacksonville yard. It had been missing for three months.

When I heard he was looking for me, I phoned him and he said he would appreciate it if I could come right over. Billy had come down to the lower east coast early and put himself deeply in hock to buy hundreds of acres of flatland too sorry to even run beef on. After he put up the first shopping mall, he went even deeper



into hock. He and Sadie were living aboard a junker with a trawler hull at Bahia Mar, living small while he made his big gambles. He was betting that the inland would have to build up to support the big beach population, and he kept right on pyramiding his bet until all of a sudden it turned around, and he became F. William Ingraham, owner of shopping malls, automobile agencies, marinas, a yacht brokerage agency, and a director of one of the banks which had been tightening the screws on him a few years earlier.

He bought waterfront residential land and one day when the house they had planned together, he and Sadie, was half built, she was there one morning looking at tile samples for the master bathrooms when she gave the young subcontractor a strange look, dropped the tile she was looking at and toppled into the framed area where the shower was going to be. She was two and a half weeks in intensive care before everything finally stopped.

They'd been married twenty-eight years and had no kids. He sank into guilt, telling anybody who'd listen that if he hadn't been so greedy he could have cashed in earlier and smaller, with more than enough to last them the rest of their lives, and she would have had a few years in the house she wanted so badly. Everybody who knew him tried to help, but we couldn't do much. He went into that kind of decline which meant he was going to follow her to wherever she had gone as soon as he was able.

But a woman half his age named Millis Hoover pulled him out of it. It took her the best part of a year. She had been working for him. Sadie's house had been

finished and sold. And he had sold off everything else, paid his debts and resigned from all boards and committees, and put the money into insured municipal bond funds. He lost all interest in making money, in wheeling, dealing and guessing the future.

It was Millis who worked him around to buying a penthouse duplex in the new Dias del Sol condo, three twenty-story towers about eight miles north of Fort Lauderdale. It has indoor and outdoor pools, health clubs, a beach, boat slips on the Waterway, a security staff, a good restaurant, room service, maid service and a concierge to help with special problems. It cost him one point two five million to buy it and, with Millis' help, to furnish it. One room was set up as a small office, because it was more efficient to have her working there. Then she moved in, because that was more convenient too. She nagged him into using the body-building equipment, into sunning himself, into doing laps in the pool every day, into eating sensibly and even into giving up his smuggled Cuban cigars and his half bottle of bourbon a day.

After he began to take pride in how he looked and how he felt, he began to take more of an interest in how Millis looked and, in time, how Millis felt. And that did not surprise anyone who had been following the woman's reconstruction of Billy Ingraham.

Anyway, I was given the expected security check in the small lobby of Tower Alpha at Dias del Sol at a little after ten in the morning on October 3, a Wednesday, and after Mr. Ingraham had confirmed to them that I was indeed expected, they aimed me toward the elevator at the end of the row.

Billy let me in. He has a big head, big thick features, a white brush cut and little brown eyes. He is instantly likable. In that sense, he has always reminded me of Meyer. Both of them treat you as if you are one of the high points of their day. Both of them listen. Both of them seem genuinely concerned about you.

“Hey, Trav! You look like you been adrift on a raft. You look damn near scrawny. What’s going on? Where were you?”

“Bringing that old sloop of Hubie Harris’ back from Marigot Bay at St. Lucia.”

“Hope nothing happened to Hube.”

“Nothing permanent. He fell and broke up his knee. Those two kids of his, twelve and thirteen, wanted to try to bring it back by themselves, but he didn’t want them to try. I’m not much for sloops, or any kind of sailing, so the kids were useful. What took so long was dodging here and there, trying to stay away from a tropical storm that was trying to be a hurricane but couldn’t decide which way to travel. Got in and they told me you wanted to talk.”

“Come on upstairs and we’ll have some coffee.”

We went up an open iron circular staircase and through a doorway that opened onto a wide patio garden overlooking the sea. The view was spectacular. I could see the deeper blue of the Stream way out. A tanker, deeply laden, was riding the Stream north, and closer, this side of the Stream, a pair of container ships were working south. Small boats danced in the glare and dazzle of the morning sun.

Millis was grubbing at a flower bed. She wore a wide straw hat, a black string bikini and red sandals.

She was sitting on her heels. She turned and stood up and dropped her cotton gloves and grubbing tool by the flowers and came toward us, cool and elegant and remote inside her coffee-cream tan, her slenderness, looking out at us through the guarded green lenses of her tilted eyes, smiling a three-millimeter smile.

"Travis, you know my wife, Millis? You know we got married last June?"

"William darling, Mr. McGee was at the wedding!"

"Oh, hell. Sure. I'm sorry. I wasn't tracking real good that day."

We sat on white iron chairs at a round white table and Millis brought us coffee and went back to her flower chores. "I guess you heard about our new boat getting stole."

"I heard it was taken, but I didn't hear any details."

He got up and went away and came back in a few minutes with some eight-by-ten color shots of the *Sundowner*, some of them taken from a helicopter.

"Very pretty," I said, studying them.

"A real gem. Fifty-four feet. Big diesels. Solid as a rock. What scalds me, Trav, was the timing of it. We wanted to take our honeymoon trip in it right after the wedding, but there'd been a delay in getting it outfitted just the way we wanted it. Well, sir, by the fourth of July I had it all equipped and provisioned, and ready for a test run. We went north up the coast, with me running it fast and running it slow, checking out the radar, Loran, recording fathometer, digital log, ship-to-shore, Hewlett-Packard 41-C with the Nav-Pac for this area. We checked out the stereo system, television reception, AC and DC, the generators, autopilot, bat-

tery feed, navigational lights, cold locker, stove, every damn thing. It all worked just fine, but you know me, Trav. I've owned enough boats for enough years to know that when you really go cruising, the things you need most are the things that quit first. She was all provisioned too, even to two cases of that Perrier champagne Millis likes.

"The sea held calm and a little after noon I came to a little inlet I've been through before, but the chart showed just enough water for me to ease through on a high tide and we were a couple of hours shy of the high, so I moved around to the lee of a big sandbar island, worked in close, threw the hook and let it slide on back to deeper water. We were planning to take our trip up the Waterway to New England, and start in a day or two, and I felt we had the right boat for it and I felt good about making that trip. I'd always wanted to do that. We had lunch and some of that good wine out in the hot sunshine and the summer breeze. I dropped off and when I woke up Millis had swum and waded over to the sandbar island."

He stopped and looked to see where she was. She was over at the far corner of the big terrace, working the flower beds. The breeze was from the sea, so his chance of being overheard was very slight. But he lowered his voice so that I had to lean toward him to hear. "After the way Sadie was," he said, "I have one hell of a time getting used to Millis' ways. She was over there shelling, naked as an egg. She's big on nature things, Trav. Jogging and roughage and work-outs and so on. The few houses I could see were far away and there were a couple of boats way out, so I

climbed down to the rear platform there and eased into the water in my trunks and went ashore to where she was shelling, knowing she would have something to say about people being too modest for their own good. But damn it, Trav, being outdoors naked makes me walk kind of hunched over. I keep waiting for a wasp to come along, or an airgun pellet or a thorn bush. And I don't like being naked in the water either. Crabs, stingrays, jellyfish.

"She showed me the stuff she'd been picking up. She had some little purple shells and she wanted me to help find her enough more so she could string a necklace. So all of a sudden I heard the *Sundowner* kick over. She caught right away. The way I figured it, the damn bastards had come out of that inlet in an outboard skiff, seen us hunting shells, seen my cruiser, then circled out around so they could come up on it on the blind side, where they boarded her, snuck forward and cut the anchor line, then started her up. They didn't start her from the fly bridge where I could have seen them, but from the pilothouse. All I ever saw was the beat-up old aluminum boat they had in tow, with the motor tilted up. It had a milky look the way old aluminum gets in salt water. He took off, swinging way out and heading north, keeping it slow and steady so as not to swamp his skiff. Know what the insurance son of a bitch said to me? He said leaving the keys in the panel was contributory negligence. My God, it was sitting there in front of us! What kind of idiot would have locked it up?"

Billy and Millis swam to the beach on the narrow spit that lies east of the Waterway. He parked her in

some scraggly brush, walked down to where some people were picnicking, told his sad story and traded his gold seal ring for a red and white poolside cover-up for Millis. Her gold bracelet guaranteed the taxi ride back to the Dias del Sol, where the resident manager let them into their penthouse.

"I'm still damned mad," Billy said. "Millis and me, we put a lot of thought and love into that boat, getting it just like we wanted it. Shit, I can afford more boats, but it won't be the same. And I was humiliated, standing there watching some young punk go grinning off with the boat, cash, wine, food, credit cards, car keys and boat keys and house keys, and some of the finest boat rods made. Nobody has done a damn thing. And I've been told you can do things when the law gives up."

"I've been known to strike out."

"You want to take a shot at it? You get thirty big ones cash in hand the day I set foot on her again."

"Lots of pleasure boats have been disappearing these last few years, Billy. And very few have ever been recovered. I don't work on a fee basis. Anything I can recover, I keep half, or half the value."

His thick gray eyebrows went halfway up his red forehead. "Isn't that a little heavy, McGee? I put seven hundred and twenty into that sucker."

"It isn't heavy because I'm talking about the value of what I recover. That sucker isn't a seven-hundred-and-twenty-thousand-dollar boat anymore, not after three months. Also, stolen cruisers usually end up in the drug business, where people don't play pat ball. Also, I swallow my own expenses, win or lose. And it

gives me a lot of incentive to look for something that's half mine. I find it in fair shape and it will pay for another piece of the retirement I keep taking now and then. Or, look at it this way. Let's say the odds against any recovery are about five hundred to one. A flat fee would start me out pretty listless."

"If you get it back, how do we put a value on it?"

"Get it surveyed as is by a licensed marine appraiser."

He frowned, and then stuck his beefy paw out. We shook hands and he said, "Done. Tell you a secret. I'd almost give you full value just to get one back at the scum that took it away and left me nothing but a hundred-and-ninety-dollar Danforth anchor and ten feet of rubber-coated chain."

Millis had finished gardening. She hosed off her tools and shut them up in a little blue locker and then came and sat with us. "Billy told me you did find a boat for someone, Mr. McGee."

"Years ago," I told her. "Five at least. It belonged to one of the Cuban buddies of Batista who got out just before Castro removed his head. And he bought a house, a motor sailer and the good life with money he'd squirreled away in Chase Manhattan while he was still a Cuban politico. Those particular immigrants aren't my favorite people. Anyway, he used a Cuban crew, and the wrong batch of Cubans took it right out of its slip at a Miami yacht club and sailed it away. There was joy and rejoicing in the Cuban community."

"How did you get it back?" she asked.

The question was mild, but it had a contentious sound. Just a little too much emphasis on the "you." How could *you* do anything so difficult? And a faint



expression of disdain, a challenge in her flat stare. New wife in the long, dogged process of detaching her husband from all prior friendships.

"Somebody told me where I could find the *Aliciente*. She'd been renamed the *Priscilla*. Two months after Calderone got her back, she blew up one night twenty miles off Key West with him aboard."

"Somebody just happened to tell you where to find it?" She wore an expression of vivid disbelief. "Why would anyone do that?"

"If you've got about a day and a half to spare, Millis, we could sit around and I could try to explain what I've learned about Cuban refugee politics in Miami."

"I'm sure you have better things to do."

"I'd guess we both do."

"What's with you two?" Billy asked angrily. "How'd you both get off on the wrong foot so fast?"

She stood up. "Sorry, Billy. I guess I'm just fascinated by people who can accomplish impossible things." She headed for the doorway into the apartment and turned and said, "What does *Aliciente* mean, Mr. McGee?"

"Temptation," I told her. She nodded, without surprise, as if she had known the meaning of the name and wondered if I did. I saw something in the back of her eyes, something that moved and challenged, creating awareness. We were in a silent communication inaccessible to the husband sitting heavily beside me.

When she was gone, Billy said, "Sorry about that. She always tries to keep me from being taken by some con artist. She thinks I'm too trusting. Hell, I've fol-